DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 088 622 RC 007 745

AUTHOR Sturges, A. W.
TITLE The Small School: A Rediscovered Resource in American Education.
PUB DATE 27 Mar 74
NOTE 7p.; Paper prepared for 79th Annual Meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, Chicago, Ill., March 24-27, 1974

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); Consolidated Schools; Curriculum Development; *Educational Improvement; Educational Resources; *Effective Teaching; Equipment Utilization; Flexible Scheduling; Geographic Location; History; Individualized Instruction; Interschool Communication; *Rural Areas; Rural Urban Differences; School Community Relationship; Shared Services; *Small Schools

ABSTRACT

Small schools, at one time the basis of education in the U.S., achieved an uncomfortable status with the development of urban centers and increasingly larger schools. Urged to consolidate to provide better services and to reduce costs, small schools were reluctant to abandon many of their advantages, such as close teacher-student relationships. Therefore, they adapted to the change, continuing to capitalize on a major strength--the emphasis on the human element of learning. This paper presents 6 major adaptations that have not only improved rural education, but that have also maintained the small school. These are: (1) the development of shared service programs; (2) the addition of extra courses to supplement curricula (i.e., correspondence courses, honors seminars via telephone, and multiple classes); (3) flexible scheduling, where teachers can identify problems during the morning, discuss and develop the idea during the afternoon, and run a trial test the next day; (4) the development of close community-school relations, and the joint resolution of local problems, such as the combining of the town and school libraries; (5) a development of empathy for the learner, where teachers and community members with special expertise assist other teachers and groups when needed; and (6) the maximum utilization of resources, especially the development of natural resources by students and teachers. Many small school administrators feel that these practices could be well adapted to the larger, urban schools. (KM)

ED 088622

The Small School: A Rediscovered Resource in American Education *

A. W. Sturges

University of Missouri

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A couple of hundred years ago, schools were built wherever enough students lived to warrant the employment of a teacher, the construction of a building and the purchase of some instructional materials. As urban centers developed, more students were found in small geographic areas and, rather than build a lot of schools for small groups of students, the cities tended to build larger schools that permitted the maximum use of buildings, teachers, administrators, materials and, when the size warranted and the problems seemed great enough, the employment of specialists in content areas, in counseling services, in health services, in food services, etc. To manage all these larger schools, a central administration was named that coordinated purchases, assured minimum instructional standards in all schools and handled the many administrative details as well as the procurement of enough money to run the system. Because of the interest in this country in "bigness", we received a lot of research reports indicating per pupil spending was reduced when schools got to a certain size, we could offer more courses in larger schools, we could have more specialists, and the teachers could be better prepared academically. There weren't as many studies to indicate the problems of "bigness", particularly in the alienation of the children and the parents from the schools.

Teachers and administrators in small schools were in an uncomfortable position. We were told to consolidate to provide

RC 007745

better programs and reduce costs. Because of spiraling costs and expanding knowledge, consolidation was necessary but we couldn't agree that all small schools had to disappear. Distances became too great and parents started to drift away from the close involvement they used to have. While large school systems were trying to resolve the many problems that were plaguing them, the small schools continued to do the best they could, with little National attention, and with quiet determination. They tried to bring down costs, increase program options, better utilize facilities, materials and staff, and also continue to capitalize on a major strength, i.e., the emphasis on the human element of learning.

Are small schools successful in resolving their problems? Let us look at some ways small schools have improved the instructional programs.

1. They have developed shared service programs. This is a system where more than one school system employs a teacher, usually a specialist. For example, a specialist in elementary counseling works with students in two neighboring schools; the specialist is paid by both districts and is expected to live in one of the cooperating districts.

2. Additional courses have been added to the program. Several ways are being used such as correspondence courses, multiple classes, honors seminars via telephone, and increased flexibility in the schedule to permit independent study. For example, a gifted student in mathematics can take an advanced mathematics course via correspondence; it is scheduled so the student works in the classroom where

where the mathematics instructor is teaching, thus providing the student with assistance when necessary as well as helping him to get the assignments done. Multiple classes have been used for some time; that is, more than one class taught by the same teacher in the same room. It is usually done on a voluntary basis (that is, teachers volunteer to offer the multiple classes), and the classes offered are in the same field (general mathematics and algebra, for example).

A distinctive development in small school instruction is the use of the amplified telephone. Geographic isolation never has meant cultural or intellectual isolation, especially in this age of electronics. Rural schools have, for some time, used amplified telephones between schools to run honor seminars between schools, to have debates between two schools with a third school acting as judges, to have guest speakers speak to classes (for example, a French instructor from the university or college, a reporter from a newspaper, the banker speaking to a Senior Social science class, etc.). Amplified telephones have also been used for in-service programs in which experts of varying hues speak to teachers on specific topics.

3. Flexible scheduling has long been used. Where else can teachers identify problems during the morning, discuss and develop the idea during the afternoon and

run a trial run the next day? Some of the earliest modified schedules were developed in small schools that combined both flexible and modular schedules. Every small school administrator knows that students who, for some reason, should work during the day, can be freed and someone in the community will help to develop work-study programs for the students.

4. Close community-school relations exist. It is difficult, if not impossible, for an administrator to remain in a small school if he does not have close community support; the community support includes almost everyone. Problems are discussed over coffee in the town restaurant, or during the board meeting. In some instances, problems common to both the school and community have been jointly resolved; for example, some rural communities have combined the town library and the school library. The school librarian comes on duty at 7:30 a.m. and works until 4 p.m.; the city librarian comes on at 3:30 p.m. and continues until 10:30 p.m. The library is open at all times to anyone in the community; purchases are jointly made and used. It has become an excellent center where patrons of different generations sit together and read.

5. Empathy for the learner exists. Certain more expensive equipment is shared between schools, ideas are pooled at multi-school meetings once a month that are teacher-run, and the services of

teachers as in-service workers is not uncommon. Thus, a teacher who develops expertise in a technique is often called on to help other teachers in a system or a neighboring school. There is not the grade barrier either; it is easier for elementary-junior and high school teachers to talk together when the entire staff can have a meeting in a single room over rolls and coffee in the late afternoon.

As part of this empathy for learners, it is easier for small schools to become community learning centers. When an area is cut off from much of the rest of the country because of bad weather or energy shortages, residents of rural areas can meet in an evening at school to watch films of symphonic music, ballet or plays, after which all the participants will eat the food brought to the meeting while discussing the film or the problems of the school or community.

6. Maximum utilization of resources takes place. Innovation and creative activities usually are the result of necessity; that is, to resolve a problem. A school with limited resources finds a number of ways to stretch their dollar, either by combining with a neighbor school to buy materials, or to share special equipment, or to share teachers or materials, or to use every inch of space. The use of hallways, entrances, playground areas, the development of nature trails, landscaping by students, etc. all have been done by students and teachers in rural areas. They hold the

same concern for quality education as their big-city brethern, fewer bureaucratic restrictions and strong interpersonal dependencies permit them to find solutions.

All of these illustrations can be documented; they have been observed in various small school projects across the United States, particularly the Upper Midwest Small Schools Project (North Dakota), the Texas Small Schools Project, the Western States Small Schools Project and the Catskill Area Project.

The small schools can act as idea generators for large schools or, if that is not acceptable, at least as field-test stations. Most of the ideas and problems generated in large schools are not unknown to small schools. Small schools can develop solutions to problems that may, with some adaptation, be acceptable solutions to large school problems. Of particular importance, I believe, is the ability of small schools to personally identify with students, teachers and parents as individuals. If the success of small schools' instructional programs has been worthwhile, it probably lies in the emphasis on individuals.

We who work in small schools know the resource potential we have. We also know we have been reading, visiting, and examining large school ideas for some time. We still are not successful in reversing the route of visits. That is, we meet each other at meetings for small schools and we see each other at large-school meetings, but we seldom see large school administrators and teachers in our schools. We have probably been too busy enjoying our comparative quiet life when we read of large-school problems, but perhaps it is time for us to help. It would be easy for me to

say "Take a large school administrator out to lunch"; it probably won't work. We can, however, be more direct in our communication by using methods understood by large school administrators. That is, drop-out rates, retention rates and success of our graduates, the small turn-over of faculty, in-service programs we conduct, the per-pupil costs we have could all be better communicated to large schools. There is no doubt in my mind that small schools will continue to exist for some time and while they exist, small schools will do a superior job of helping individuals mature into American citizens.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 79th Annual Meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, 24-27 March 1974, Chicago, Illinois.